“Be My Trew Mistres Still, Not My Faignd Page”:
Truth and Disguise in Donne’s “Elegy 16”

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A pivotal element in John Donne’s “Elegy 16” is his use of the page-disguise motif. No thorough analysis having been overtly devoted to it, this paper aims to explore its nature and significance within the poem and the broader context of early modern English literature. By carefully reading the elegy in terms of the technical aspects and implications of Donne’s conception of disguise, it is argued that its non-normative translucence chiefly rests on his own personal politics of power and certainty. Therefore, the resultant realistic deviation, along with his concomitant articulation of the grotesque, are claimed to assume a paradigmatic quality in his poetry when bringing into final artistic shape his vast array of experiential raw material.

Key words: John Donne, Elegy 16, William Shakespeare, Renaissance literature, disguise, cross-dressing, grotesque

I

“Elegy 16,” popularly known as “On His Mistris,” is a fine example of John Donne’s love poetry. It is true that the relevance of Donne is marked to a large extent by an uninhibited response to hackneyed artistic practices. As part of a cyclical tendency in history to come away from the hegemonic prevalence of any given cultural ideals, this concern “can be seen in Sidney’s ‘Looke in thy heart and write,’ or Shakespeare’s ‘My Mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun’” (Evans 1955: 162–63); devoid as poetry was of the genuine, natural, direct spontaneity and inspiration of real life, Donne also contravenes what had chiefly grown out of literary tradition and tacit custom. But perhaps the intrinsic value of such departure from the norm reaches its height in the mechanics of the motif of the woman in page-disguise as carried out in “Elegy 16.” One of the central constants at work in his verse is his profound preoccupation with truth from both personal and contemporary angles. The idea of disguise being a traditional source of deceit, Donne’s does not fail to bring together his reaction against conventional uses, his disposition towards truthfulness, and the

1. The unmodernised edition used in this study corresponds to the text provided by manuscript “NY3” and followed in Roberts (2000: 246–47). Nevertheless, its more traditional editorial classification as “Elegy 16” is adopted at the expense of “Elegy 11.”

2. Various dates by critics within a period spanning over fifteen years, from 1593 to 1611, recent criticism prefers a date not later than 1600 (Roberts 2000: 778–81).
attainment of power. In keeping with this, the organisation of the main analytical points will therefore comprise a brief overview of the general principles underlying the device of disguise; the critical exploration of possible sources of inspiration; and finally, the rationale of Donne's individual approach as modulated by his own attitude towards certainty and authority, all with a view to elucidating its precise function and ramifications.

II

The ultimate origins of the woman disguised as a man in Western literature are to be found in the classical inheritance, as well as in medieval romances, legends, tales, traditional ballads, and the Italian Renaissance. Drawing on authors such as Lodge, Montemayor, or Riche, early modern English playwrights gave themselves over to the practice of this type of disguise. Shakespeare made use of the heroine disguising herself as a young man in five of his plays: The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It, Twelfth Night, and Cymbeline. Even though this discussion adopts a different critical perspective, it has to be noted that cross-dressing on the early modern stage has received a substantial amount of objective consideration over recent decades from feminist, historicist and gender studies (Kimbrough 1982; Jardine 1983; Rackin 1987; Brown 1990; Shapiro 1994; Orgel 1997; Howard 1998; Wallen 2002). Yet this ample academic debate, alongside other approaches to the question (Freeburg 1915; Bradbrook 1952; White 1984; Baker 1992), including Donne's critics (Roberts 2000: 781–819), has nevertheless left largely unexplained and unexplored the precise role played by disguise in “On His Mistris.” Authors such as Freeburg (1915: 61), Ashcom (1960), Bravo-Villasante (1988: 131–45), Howard (1988), Shapiro (1994), and Ungerer (2000) have variously noted and studied the practice and controversy surrounding contemporary real-life cross-dressing. Evidence makes it clear that real life and convention were subject to mutual influence. Disguised heroines became so popular that not only did they in response frequently arouse meta-theatrical allusions related to a keen awareness of the motif, but they served as models to be followed in everyday life as well. Onstage and in real life, disguises basically gave female characters and women full scope, regardless of their motivations, which temporarily alleviated the social restrictions imposed on womanhood by a patriarchal system. Inspired by the exploits of literary heroines or by a simple matter of expediency, cross-dressing can well be understood here as another telling manifestation of Donne's influential reification of contemporary life.

III

This motif therefore provides the central theme of the love poem: the speaker's use of his powers of persuasion to convince his mistress that to dress as a page and follow him in his travels would be a foolish course of action. With a sharp, specific audience in mind, most probably that of Lincoln’s Inn, Donne turned the page apparel inside out. As a popular convention, he made this possible by wittily reversing a set of expectations commonly associated with it. But wit was only a conductor of his nature: “Power is the shaping principle in Donne’s verse” (Carey 1981: 117), a motivation closely connected with the
anxiety that permeates his conception of the body (Guibbory 1990; Sellek 2001). As a result, his treatment of disguise responds to authority, but also to laughter and physicality, as will be discussed below.

Indeed, central to the disguise is its potential both as a comic instrument and as a source of dramatic tension. Most critics agree with Bradbrook’s argument that “impenetrability of disguise” (1960: 54) was a matter of common acceptance in Elizabethan drama, a characteristic to which Shakespeare adheres influentially in the context of romantic comedy. Never do slight or apparent signs of discovery crystallise in patent, unquestionable, recognition—let alone unmasking, not even when the other characters’ perception may be enhanced by what Weimann calls acts of “self-disclosure” (1994: 11). Accordingly, if compared to Donne’s indirect application of disguise, Shakespeare’s should be considered the unmarked one in the establishment of discriminations inasmuch as it is characterised by complete opacity in practice, as opposed to virtual transparency, anticipated as it is throughout “Elegy 16.” This is the key variation on the concept of disguise made by Donne. Having said this, much could also be said about the fact that boy-actors enacted the women’s roles, as gender perspectives have extensively demonstrated. However, what is relevant here is rather the relationship between perception and probability. Basically, the boy-actor tradition added a stratiform complexity to characterisation and the plays by extension. One of its major assets was undoubtedly the fact that these actors counterbalanced the improbability associated with their impregnable personations. Being real young men, they made impenetrability more convincingly believable. Given that Donne, although aware of it, was not subject to this performance prerequisite, “Elegy 16” is endowed with a further meta-literary quality: it provides compelling comments on the unlikeliness that govern the dramatic adoption of a man’s habit onstage. Whereas Shakespeare’s language creates an enhanced reality that makes it possible for the maidens in disguise not to be recognised, Donne breaks through this logic; he makes a clear distinction between the non-naturalistic aspects of disguise and real life.

It is also necessary to clarify whether the speaker is attempting to deter his mistress from travelling incognito, once he has left, or simply accompanying him. Perhaps, even both possibilities are viable at the same time within the speaker’s plan of dissuasion. Assuming that she were to accompany him from the start as his page, it is obvious that in Shakespeare’s plays only one occurrence parallel to this hypothesis can apparently be found: the case of Jessica in The Merchant of Venice exemplifies this particular use; she is taken in page’s apparel from Shylock’s house by Lorenzo (2: 6). Her personation is defined as “task-oriented,” episodic, rather than “improvisational” or indefinite (Baker 1992: 308). The other heroines, nevertheless, find themselves involved in slightly different situations and fall into the improvisational, more creative, mode: Rosalind is banished—she does not

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3. Exceptionally, John Lyly’s play, The Maydes Metamorphosis (1600), presents an ironic case of penetrability in which the sexual disguise is provided by her actual metamorphosis into a man, as in Gallathea (1592), which features another sex-change.

4. Most opinions are rather vague and conflictive when dealing with this point: see Gardner (1979: 24); Bedford (1982: 224); and Lerner (1988: 126). Having an editorial, rather than authorial, origin, the validity of headings or subtitles is far from conclusive; see Roberts (2000: 254). Bedford (1982: 220) argues that the “theatricality of the disguise . . . has not prevented the verisimilitude” of biographical identification, which is rather marginal in this reading.
dressed to follow Orlando, but to survive; Portia and Nerissa act as lawyer and clerk respectively; Imogen disguises herself as a page to make Posthumus believe that she is dead and be near him in Rome; Viola seeks to serve Orsino; and Proteus is unaware of Julia’s risky venture on her own in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Donne seems to be denying his mistress this power of improvisation, keeping it only for himself. However, although Jessica shares a motivational context of parental intransigence with “Elegy 16,” Lorenzo, as opposed to the active poetic *persona*, seems to be pleased with the idea—he even intends to use her as his torchbearer in a masque that finally does not take place. The moral integrity of the disguise is called into question in the plays, whereas there is no such indication in “Elegy 16.” The propositional content of the poem thus appears, on the whole, to be, as it were, less bizarre and more likely than the disguise-related scenes of the five plays.

In that case, if a still closer, though not exact, antecedent had to be put forward, that is necessarily afforded by Brooke’s *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), curiously the major source of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, a play of which some critics have heard echoes in “Elegy 16.” Gardner draws attention to the fact that Juliet “pleads with her lover to be allowed to follow him into exile disguised,” although in the play Juliet “makes no such romantic suggestion” (1965: 140). Similarly oriented towards the elucidation of the aforementioned dilemma is the fact that in the poem Romeus states that, should his banishment never be lifted, he would take her not “in mans weede disguisd, or as one scarcely knowne,/But as my wife and onely feere, in garment of thy owne” (Brooke 1984: 1681–82). The initial implications are clear: its presence in an eminently tragic, rather than romantic or tragicomic, context endows the motif with different undertones. More important still, Romeus’ act of dissuasion reinforces his authority in the poem—he promises that they will be together without recourse to disguise, whereas in the play it is Juliet who undergoes a remarkable evolution in these very terms, which relegates Romeo to a relatively secondary position. Thus, while Shakespeare’s omission is indirectly suggestive of this same sanction or weight of authority with which Donne endows the male *persona* of the poem, Brooke’s poem provides a self-evident design in which appearance and reality do not coalesce, which parallels Donne’s deviation from the fixed mechanisms of a stock device. More organically related to Brooke’s poem, justification exists here for the hypothesis that behind these resemblances may therefore lie some inspiration for the situation in “Elegy 16.” In terms of its dramatic potentialities to enhance tension and produce humorous misapprehensions, the use of disguise in the plays is highly functional. However, albeit conscious of them, Donne is not interested in creating further tension in this valedictory environment. Tinged as it is with a feeling of near fatality, the speaker instead jovially focuses his authority on the lady’s disguised body. He asserts his control precisely by unmasking her himself. That explains why his assertive departure from the patent safety provided by the opaqueness of the attire would not easily involve typical subterfuge, ambiguity, or double-meaning, instrumental as they are in making the

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5. For probity in relation to disguise, see Bradbrook (1952: 160–62) and Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila (2002: 547–48).

6. Freeburg (1915: 43) points out that in “Novella 33,” Italian Salernitano presents an actual disguise situation similar to the Romeus-and-Juliet plot, with a disguised heroine but “where no mistake of identity ensues,” as in 27 and 35.
Shakespearean heroines pass as men beyond the initial levelling force of the purely physical disguise. In consequence, any privileged temporary emancipation is also absent: the sustained “masculine persuasive force” (l. 4) of the poem appears to prevent any possibilities of liberation from social restraints, however temporary it is. His contravention is merely directed to assert himself.

The question of influence is indeed one of the main points at issue. It is certainly significant that, during his four-year residence at Lincoln’s Inn, he was as renowned for his womanising and poetic aptitudes as for his liking for the theatre (Grierson 1921: 228). In fact, Donne’s poetic style is infused with genuine dramatic nuances, even though he did not apply himself professionally, as far as it is known, to the boards, unlike John Heywood, his grandfather. In view of these biographical indications and its popularity on the contemporary stage, what is indubitable here is that he conceivably became acquainted with the device somehow or other.\(^7\) In this respect, Donne’s controversial stay abroad between the years 1589 and 1591-1592, prior to his period as a law and theology student, should not be ruled out altogether because of its obscurity. Walton’s biography underlines his mastery of languages and the foreign volumes of his library, those from Spain being the most numerous (Grierson 1966: 201). Italian and Spanish prose-writers and playwrights had long been exploring and exploiting the wide range of opportunities afforded by the fashionable convention of sexual disguise. In Spain, building on preceding Spanish and Italian assimilations, Lope de Vega’s popularisation and innovative development of this model\(^8\) was considerable; within the expanding boundaries of the Comedia Nueva, which he championed, this gifted dramatist and poet was already using female characters in masculine disguise by the mid-1580s, as in Los hechos de Garcilaso de la Vega, probably written before 1585. The relevance of this fact is that, allowing for obvious cultural differences, Donne’s handling of the motif appears to reflect some properties initially more congenial to Lope’s plays than to early modern English drama. What is significant here is not only that actresses played the women’s parts on the Spanish boards, but rather the apparently endemic existence in Lope of a crucial variation on his own sources. This imaginative mutation results in the frequent translucence or even transparency of the disguise. Under certain conditions, this paves the way for a recognition that may or may not determine the moment of actual unmasking (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2002: 542). At one level of response it can be regarded as more natural and less purposely idealised than in the English plays. Suggested dates of composition of “Elegy 16” also show the possibility of such stimulus in a favourable light. In any case, though the extent of contemporary foreign influence over Donne’s works is still to be solidly demonstrated, it is undeniable that there is enough rigorous evidence to suggest that these divergences should, if not be taken as a direct, or indirect, result of some hypothetical first-hand knowledge of the Comedia of the Spanish Siglo de Oro, at least be carefully taken into account to approach what may lie beneath these noticeable modulations of its adduced English sources or referents.

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\(^7\) Bedford (1982: 220) comments on the “peculiar (if largely undemonstrable) influence, or correspondence of the Elizabethan theatre.” See also Gardner (1965: 140); Jha (1972: 96–97); and Marotti (1986: 64). There is an indefinite number of works featuring disguised heroines, romances included, that predate Shakespeare’s first use of the motif; see Freeburg (1915) and Shapiro (1994).

\(^8\) For an approximate catalogue of these plays in Spanish drama, see Ashcom (1960) and Bravo-Villasante (1988).
The preamble to the poem serves as an introduction to Donne’s thematic conception of disguise. After some tension has progressively built up by delaying the informative focus, the vehement admonition towards his mistress in line 12, “Thou shallt not Love by meanes so dangerous,” acts as a plosive release and cataphorically introduces the main theme by means of a declarative act: “Be my trew Mistres still, not my faignd Page” (l. 14). The plain diction and tone of the exhortation are reminiscent of the Holy Scriptures, and more specifically of the Ten Commandments; since it does not admit non-compliance, it serves as a further means to increase the speaker’s authority—that of a zealous magister amoris—which has been gently accumulated in the previous lines. Just as he urges her to be his “trew Mistres” and not his “faignd Page” (l. 14), so does he emphasise reality over appearance, truth over falsity. Donne’s authoritative commitment to verisimilitude, to plant the seed of intellectual disbelief, and to relativise certainties reflects the sign of the times in Europe at the turn of the century, as well as his tense personal development and circumstances.

Deceit is here associated with disguise, and Donne is at his most articulate in gaining insight into what conceals truth and arriving at truth itself. Implacable, he is set to unmask her in anticipation. Taking the mistress’ beauty as his argumentative point, he violates the decorum of amatory poetry by admitting its impotence in the face of the “Rage from the seas” (l. 20) and “Boreas harshnesse” (l. 21). Some critics (Bedford 1982; Lerner 1988) acknowledge Donne’s participation in a trend of reconciliation of English verse with the multi-layered, pre-courtly love dimensions of both satirical and amatory Latin poetry, especially that of Ovid9 and other Roman poets, such as Catullus, Propertius, or Tibullus. Yet his assimilation of the classical tradition is highly complex. The allusions to King Canute, Boreas, and Orithea (ll. 19-23) hardly fit in the widespread “anti-classical movement at the end of the century”—already present in Sidney’s Astrophil and Stella and “more strongly in Donne’s avoidance of classical reference” (Evans 1955: 163). A sensible explanation can be found in the fact that the use of “indecorous classical allusion” has long been associated with the articulation of laughter (Evans 1955: 162). This mythological material becomes therefore meaningful as an exception in that it functions as a vehicle for the speaker’s jocular expression of the harsh truth. Consequently, while still retaining their emotional intensity, the negation of these conventional hyperboles10 leads to a logic of patent actuality that undermines any idealised, romantic notions related to the disguise motif.

Disguising entails two dimensions, internal and external. In either case, there is a meaningful distinction between what can and what cannot be changed through pieces of common sense relentlessly addressed to the mistress. Her inner appearance encompasses her own personality traits, her soul, her “Minds” habit (28). This should be replaced by the impersonation of a male identity, a page’s in this case, which would imply the


10. Leishman (1963: 174) argues that “many of Donne’s hyperboles are, as it were, satires on hyperboles, hyperboles to end hyperbole.”
thorough adoption, among other requisites, of an appropriate register in accordance with her new masculine nature (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2002: 546–51). In advising against that course, the same vehemence is applied to prevent her from perilously expressing verbally either her feeling for him or her feelings about love, as well as bursting out crying if ever awakened by nightmares at midnight (ll. 49–56). To that end, the classical amatory motif of the conscia nutrix is here parodied to highlight that even in dreams she might put their clandestine love in danger. It is not too much to say that Brooke’s poem and Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet by indirect extension reverberate through this light-hearted section. Nevertheless, rather than a trustworthy confidante, the nurse is looked upon as a potential source of risk. From the outside, the heroines’ beauty and youth are insistently, dangerously, and even suspiciously commented upon in the plays (Nisa Cáceres and Moreno Soldevila 2002: 539–40). Yet the resulting intensification of the dramatic tension is here nipped in the bud, and so is any associated improbability when no recognition takes place. Her beauty acts as an infallible informer; dressed as a man nobody would fail to notice in her face “a blushing womanly discovering grace” (l. 30). There is also a profound distrust of the mistress’ face in his impetuous recommendation that, while he is away, nobody should ever notice any change in her “looks” (l. 48). Given that appearance is to be perceived as a genuine reflection of reality, her real self beneath a disguise is not more at risk than the secret of their love during his absence. Under no circumstances should she assume a false appearance, let alone a boy’s or page’s, either internally or externally, since it would be wishful thinking to expect her to go unnoticed as a page because of the feminine definition of her facial features. Impossible to alter successfully by her “bodies habit” (l. 28), her face would give her away, revealing her true identity, as suggested by the highly condescending proverbial flavour of the analogies drawn between she who tries to adopt a disguise with “Apes” 11 and the “Moone” (ll. 31–32). There is always a part of the body, or the mind, that cannot be sufficiently covered or masked.

However, the gentle, slightly parodic overtones of the last (ll. 43–56) and first sections (ll. 1–32)—amounting to home truths in their quasi-dogmatic sincerity—appear to contrast with lines 33–43. Still labouring the point, it is the sheer juxtaposition of incongruent tones that makes a difference. The speaker turns from playful gentility to humorous unpleasantness based on sex and sordidness. No explicit reference is made anywhere to a possible defence of her endangered honour, 12 which reinforces an incipient sense of almost cynical nonchalance; friction arises from the sharp contrast between his sustained self-assurance, his power, and what appears as an indifferent, uncaring declaration of impotence. The ensuing uneasiness and tension hinges on satire and the aesthetic mode of grotesque realism. Donne witnessed the emergence of new styles of comic prose, which influenced poetry and drama; the blend of incongruous

11. A Renaissance proverb by which Erasmus stresses women’s unchangeable stupidity; “pages” were frequently called ‘apes’ at the time (Roberts 2000: 806); for the ape as metaphor, see Curtius (1953: 538–40); Bradbrook argues that, according to Puritan views on the function and potential dangers of clothing, apparel “was not thought of as concealing but as revealing the personality of the wearer” (1952: 165–66).

tones created “a grotesque vision of the physical life of the community” (Rhodes 1980: 4). Satire can be oriented towards national prejudices, whereas laughter is ambivalent; this is the world of carnival, of topsy-turvidom, of proverbial bawdiness where “he who is laughing also belongs to it” (Bakhtin 1968: 12). The realism behind the “material bodily principle” (Bakhtin 1968: 18) merges with the notion of disguise, which also implies “a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis” (Bakhtin 1968: 24). There seems to be an underlying ludicrous, appealing side to the abhorrent prospects that await her; the grotesque is articulated through the principle of the attraction of repulsion, a fit phrase here, commonly associated to Dickens’s own conception of the grotesque in an urban context. Hence the speaker’s ambivalent, conflictive responses and witty inversions. Regarding Wilbur Sander’s disconcert and disappointment with the overall tonal dissimilarity, Bedford justifies it as Donne’s intention to assert reality through the reversal of the theatrical convention of impenetrability (Bedford 1982: 230). On the whole, this unease is consistently levelled at her hypothetical page attire. In going through an inventory of chauvinistic clichés to describe French life and its dramatis personae, much special emphasis is here laid on their renowned changeability and mastery of dramatic manoeuvring. Any attempt at deception would immediately be discovered by these “changeable Cameleons,” who are as well “the rightest Companee/Of Players, which upon the worlds Stage be” (ll. 35–36). As a widespread commonplace in the Renaissance (Curtius 1953: 138–44; Tronstad 2002), the allusive presence of theatrum mundi in “Elegy 16” reinforces their theatrical gifts and perspicacity. She does not stand a chance. Their innate accomplishments would indeed allow them to see who she really is and get to know her intimately, allegedly by force, something not precisely justifiable in moral terms.

But perversion, the “know thee, and know thee” (l. 37), indicative of their lust and loose morals, does not end here: it would make no difference to Italians whether she is a man or a woman; in fact they are “indifferent” (l. 38), reputed to have an immoral or unacceptable sexual behaviour of Biblical magnitude. Again, the uselessness of the disguise is intensely focused on, even more so this time by reintroducing sexual abuse. Dutchmen are also to be feared for their insatiable appetites. Hydropsy creates for Donne an attractive image (Carey 1981: 177) of a diseased, grotesque body. He is talking about harsh realities at the expense of decorum, for real life should be seen in its proper perspective in order to avoid unwanted incidents and disagreeable experiences. Insofar as it is everyday life, the real, tragicoomic world that lays the fundamental groundwork for the grotesque (Thomson 1972: 8), this mode solidifies the impression of unmasking realism under construction. By undermining conventions readily taken for granted, any perceptive numbness grown out of familiarity, Donne’s grotesque becomes an essential ingredient in his authoritative recognition underneath its disguises of the established order of things.

13. See The Two Gentlemen of Verona (2.7.40–41).
14. Evans considers Donne and the University Wits “representatives of one of the periodical swings from the romantic to the sexual within the great tradition of English poetry” (1955: 165); see also Treviño Benet (1994).
15. For some discussions of the grotesque in Donne, see Guilborry (1990); Pando Canteli (1993); and Selleck (2001).
The conclusions of this analysis make a case for its initial considerations. It is verified that a close reading of Donne’s unconventional treatment of disguise consequently throws light on the study of its conventional mechanisms in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Well-acquainted with them, as has been argued when surveying the question of influence or inspiration, either foreign or domestic, he can easily and meaningfully depart from the established rules. The poetic voice seizes and delights in supreme power; the authority embedded in his “masculine persuasive force” (l. 4) is able to alter the impenetrable nature of disguise, to see through falsity at all levels. In his unmasking of appearances, fallacies, and idealisations, Donne avails himself of the classical tradition along with the carnivalesque ambivalence of laughter, physicality, and grotesque realism. They all contribute to the creation of a realistic impression of life more harmoniously proportioned to his commanding temperament, to which they ultimately revert. Therefore, any academic approach to the concept of disguise or the poetry of John Donne is provided with a comprehensive, in-depth examination of its essential functions in “Elegy 16.” This is particularly the case with respect to the latter, as only broad, relatively vague critical views existed beforehand, which makes this discussion all the more pertinent.16

Works Cited


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